

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Child and Family Services Review process examines seven major child welfare outcomes in the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being from a randomly selected sample of cases. It also examines the level of functioning of seven systemic factors, primarily on the basis of interviews with key community and agency stakeholders. The review determined that the Massachusetts child welfare programs were operating in substantial conformity with applicable Federal requirements on one of the seven major outcomes and with six of the seven systemic factors.

The Child and Family Services Review covers a broad array of child welfare programs, including child protective, family preservation, family support, reunification, foster care and adoption services. The review examines state performance on outcomes and systemic factors during a specific time period, which, in the case of Massachusetts, was from April 1, 2000 to July 27, 2001. It is intended to provide insight into the interrelated outcomes and systemic factors under review. With a strong focus on developing program improvement plans that are based on the results of the reviews, the process strives to identify not only areas needing improvement, but also the strengths within programs upon which meaningful plans for improvement can be developed.

The one outcome in which Massachusetts was determined to be in substantial conformity is the second permanency outcome, which evaluates the preservation of family relationships and connections for children in foster care. Massachusetts' strong attention to, and use of, relatives as placement resources for children contributed to the positive findings in this outcome. At the State's request, the sample of cases reviewed was stratified to include relative care placements to gather information on the impact of Massachusetts' kinship care initiative on the safety, permanency and well-being of children. In the cases reviewed, kinship care was found to have resulted in positive outcomes for children in these placements.

Among the systemic factors under review, Massachusetts was determined to be in substantial conformity in the areas of statewide information system, quality assurance system, training, service array, agency responsiveness to the community, and foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention. Several areas in the State's system were noted as having particular strengths, including the development and statewide implementation of family based services, the use of multidisciplinary assessment teams, the design and operation of the six-month foster care case review process, and the enhanced system for recruiting and supporting family resource parents (which includes foster, kinship, guardianship, and adoptive parents).

The review identified needs for improvement in both of the safety outcomes; in providing children with permanency and stability in their living situations (permanency outcome 1); and in all three of the well-being outcomes with regard to enhancing parental capacity to provide for their children's needs, and providing adequate services in the areas of education, physical health, and mental health.

In the area of safety, Massachusetts did not achieve the national standard for the recurrence rate of maltreatment (7.4%, compared to a national standard of 6.1%) or for preventing maltreatment of children in foster care (.94%, compared to a national standard of .57%). While safety is an area needing improvement, in a majority of the cases during the period under review, decision-making on child safety issues was found to be timely, appropriate, and consistent with State policy for the investigation and assessment of reports alleging abuse/neglect of children by a caretaker.

Achieving permanency for children in foster care is an area of particular concern with the State's high rate of foster care re-entries (22.3%, compared to a national standard of 8.6%) and the low rate of achieving adoption for children within 24 months of entering foster care (9.4%, compared to a national standard of 32%). Delays in achieving permanency as a result of legal or other procedural requirements were found in the Department of Social Services, the Courts, and the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children.

For the first well-being outcome, enhancing parental capacity to provide for their children's needs, it was determined that efforts to involve parents in case planning were inconsistent. In addition, reviewers found barriers to families gaining timely access to appropriate services because of disparities between the assessed need and the services provided, the lack of certain services such as placement options for adolescents and affordable housing and/or extensive waiting lists for particular services such as mental health and substance abuse treatment.

The well-being outcomes related to the education and the physical and mental health of children were also rated as areas needing improvement. In a number of cases, educational and medical needs were not addressed. In addition, serious issues with coordination of and access to mental health services were found.

Among the seven systemic factors, the case review system in Massachusetts was the one factor that was determined not to be in substantial conformity. This factor includes the process for development of the case plan, foster care case reviews, permanency hearings, termination of parental rights, and notice of reviews to out-of-home caregivers. The areas in need of improvements are the involvement of families in developing case plans for their children and the quality of permanency hearings in the Courts.

Presented below is a synopsis of the Review findings.

I. SAFETY OUTCOMES

Safety Outcome 1: Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect

- 89.4% of the applicable cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved.

In the majority of applicable cases, the Department responded to reports alleging abuse and/or neglect of children and made face-to-face contact with the child(ren) involved in these reports within the timeframe required by State policy. Stakeholders attributed much of the

positive work done during intake and investigation to the experience and training of investigative staff. While a few cases were not responded to in accord with State requirements, stakeholders expressed the opinion that the Department's improved oversight and closer monitoring of the child protective system have resulted in greater consistency in practice and fuller compliance with State guidelines for investigation and assessment.

- According to the data in the statewide assessment, the 7.4% recurrence rate of maltreatment in Massachusetts approaches but does not meet the national standard of 6.1%.

While the State's data did not meet the national standard, only two of the applicable cases examined during the on-site review had repeat maltreatment during the review period. As reported in the statewide assessment and confirmed by stakeholder interviews, several changes in practice may result in improvements in this area. For example, the Department has implemented a revised case practice protocol that ensures a higher level of scrutiny for all open cases in which a subsequent report of maltreatment is filed. Stakeholders also noted that increased collaboration with other clinicians through the use of Multidisciplinary Assessment Teams (MDATs), Sexual Abuse Intervention Network (SAIN) teams, and Family Based Services team meetings is also adding to the Department's ability to keep children safe.

However, prior to the period under review, maltreatment recurred in a majority of cases. Information from the cases reviewed and stakeholder interviews appears to support the premise in the statewide assessment that the recurrence of maltreatment was more likely to be found in cases involving chronic neglect.

- The State's rate of .94% for preventing maltreatment of children in foster care does not meet the national standard of .57%.

While the national standard was not achieved, maltreatment of children in foster care was not found in any of the 32 out-of-home cases reviewed on-site.

The case review and stakeholder interviews confirmed that several of the Department's policies and practices are contributing to the safety of children in out-of-home placement. These include the strengthening of licensing standards, a focus on safety during the foster care review process, and an increased level of contact and support provided by DSS Workers. In addition, the Department enhanced the supportive services provided to foster and adoptive parents through programs such as KidsNet and Adoption Crossroads.

Status for Safety Outcome 1: Not In Substantial Conformity.

Basis: While 89% of the cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved, five (11%) of the 47 applicable cases were rated either partially or not achieved; therefore, the required 90% case performance level was not met. In addition, the State did not achieve the national standards for repeat maltreatment and maltreatment of children in foster care.

Safety Outcome 2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate

- 82.5% of the applicable cases reviewed under this outcome were rated substantially achieved.

In the area of services to protect children and to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placements, in the majority of cases, timely and appropriate services were provided to preserve families and to safely maintain children in their homes. Despite these strengths, in some of the applicable cases, reviewers identified problems such as delays in providing the necessary services to families caused by waiting lists and the lack of certain services, particularly substance abuse and mental health treatment, and/or the provision of inadequate or inappropriate services that were not targeted to the identified needs of children or families.

The Department made efforts to reduce the risk of harm in over 82% of the applicable cases reviewed. DSS staff were found to have frequent contact with families to monitor the level of risk to the child(ren) in the home. In addition, DSS workers were utilizing a team approach in assessment and decision-making as well as taking advantage of the consultation available for cases involving domestic violence. However, in a few cases, service needs identified during the assessment were not adequately or appropriately addressed. This failure to follow through resulted in cases remaining open due to continued risk to the child.

Stakeholders expressed the opinion that while improvements still need to be made in this area, several of the State's recent investments and improved practices were factors that may contribute to the Department's ability to reduce the risk of harm to children. Confirming the findings of the statewide assessment, reviewers and stakeholders noted that the Department has strengthened the front-end of the services continuum largely through its Family Based Services initiative and the provision of flexible funding to meet specific needs of families.

Status for Safety Outcome 2: Not In Substantial Conformity.

Basis: Seven (17.5%) of the 40 applicable cases reviewed under this outcome were rated either partially or not achieved; therefore, the required 90% case performance level was not met.

II. PERMANENCY OUTCOMES

Permanency Outcome 1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations

Given the Department's emphasis on placement with kin, the out-of-home case sample being reviewed was stratified to include equal numbers of unrelated and related foster home placement cases.

- 75% of the applicable out-of-home placement cases reviewed under this outcome were rated substantially achieved.
- The State's rate of 22.3% for preventing foster care re-entries did not meet the national standard of 8.6%.

While the national standard was not achieved, only one of the applicable cases reviewed on-site had re-entries into care during the review period. Prior to this period, however, approximately one-third of the applicable cases had multiple entries into care. Although the case review did not conclusively show that re-entries into care were less likely for kinship placement than for unrelated placements, the statewide assessment found that children in kinship care are less likely to move in and out of substitute care than children in other placement settings. Stakeholders expressed the opinion that the aftercare and post-reunification services provided by the Family Based Services and CommonWorks programs have the potential for reducing recidivism.

- The State's rate of 76.95% for achieving placement stability for children in out-of-home care did not reach the national standard of 86.7%.

While the State's data did not meet the national standard, in 91% of the applicable cases reviewed on-site, children in care had no more than two placement changes during the period under review. In addition to the more stable kinship placements, stakeholders identified the six-week placement review for early identification of placement issues, the level of commitment by the Family Resource Workers, and additional supports to foster families as contributing to increased placement stability.

Despite these strengths, there were a few non-relative cases during the period under review and a number of cases prior to the period under review in which children experienced more than two placement changes during their stay in foster care. The findings in the statewide assessment confirmed that this lack of stability for children in foster care is a real concern of the Department. In addition, a number of stakeholders, including the adolescents that were interviewed, expressed concern about the movement of children in placement.

It is the opinion of stakeholders that remaining challenges in foster care re-entries and placement stability include expanding the Department's ability to provide post-reunification services and achieving more appropriate placement modalities for children with specialized needs, adolescents, and children that need step-down care upon release from hospitals and more restrictive facilities.

- The State's rate of 72.9% of children who are reunified with their parents within 12 months of removal does not meet the national standard of 76.2%.

- In addition, the State's rate of 9.4% of children adopted within 24 months of removal does not meet the national standard of 32%.

In addition to not achieving the national standards in this area, reviewers and stakeholders noted barriers to timely permanency (includes reunification, adoption, guardianship, and permanent foster families) for children in nearly half of the applicable cases reviewed. These delays involved legal or other procedural requirements within the Department, the Courts, and the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC). Examples of delays that were found include: a lack of clarity regarding the goal; lack of or inappropriate service provision needed for finalizing the permanency plan; issues with timely scheduling of TPR trials and/or obtaining decisions on TPR appeals; and, lengthy periods of time required for obtaining the necessary paperwork/home studies through the ICPC. While challenges remain, reviewers noted increased monitoring by the Department of its performance in achieving timely permanency for children, including foster care reviews, progress supervisory reviews and use of the permanency planning conferences.

Although the State did not meet the national standard, timely adoptions were achieved or in progress for the majority of the applicable cases reviewed. Stakeholders also spoke about the Department's efforts to expedite and increase adoptions and guardianships. They noted a number of creative strategies to achieve timely adoption for waiting children, including permanency mediation, concurrent planning, and partnerships with other public and private agencies that recruit and/or provide support for adoptive homes.

According to the statewide assessment, the Department continues to make advancements in reducing the number of children waiting for permanent homes, showing a decrease of over 1,000 since the early 1990's. In December of 2000, while approximately 2,900 children had a goal of adoption, fewer than 500 children were still in need of an identified pre-adoptive placement.

However, reviewers found that improvements are needed in the areas of independent living services and other planned permanent living arrangements. In the applicable cases for independent living services and other planned permanent living arrangements, appropriate services to achieve these goals were not provided. Some stakeholders expressed the opinion that there is an overuse of independent living and long-term foster care goals for youth. While acknowledging the Department's increased efforts to support the well-being of former foster care youth, a few stakeholders still expressed deep concern about youth who continue to age-out of the system with few supports and without any connections.

Status for Permanency Outcome 1: Not In Substantial Conformity.

Basis: Eight (25%) of the 32 applicable out-of-home placement cases reviewed under this outcome were rated either as partially or not achieved; therefore, the required case performance level of 90% was not met. In addition, the State's rates for (1) foster care re-entries, (2) achieving reunification within twelve months of removal, and (3) adoption within twenty-four months of removal did not meet their respective national standards.

Permanency Outcome 2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

- 91% of the applicable out-of-home placement cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved.

Reviewers noted that the stratification of the case sample, which included more relative caregivers, may have contributed to higher levels of achievement for some of the following permanency performance indicators.

In all of the applicable cases reviewed, children were generally kept in their communities or within the regional areas. When children were placed outside of their community, it was typically to meet their special needs for additional supports or to facilitate an adoption or placement with a relative. In addition, in all but one case, children with siblings in-care were placed together. Although not seen in the period under review, stakeholders reported that the dearth of foster homes - in some regions more than others - necessitate placements outside of the area and separation of siblings.

Both the cases reviewed and stakeholder comments confirmed that visitation between parents and siblings in foster care generally meets, and in some cases exceeds, state policy requirements. Reviewers found that in the majority of applicable cases, DSS staff and foster care providers promoted parent-child contact. There were cases in which parents were very involved in the every-day life events of their children despite placement, often because of the encouragement and support by Department or provider staff. Workers and foster parents helped children maintain connections with family members by encouraging letters and phone calls when parental visits were not in the best interests of the child. In all but one case, workers and foster parents clearly made strong efforts to help children maintain connections not only with family members but also with schools, counselors, and health care providers.

The stratified sample of 16 relative placement and 16 unrelated placement cases allowed ACF and the Department the opportunity to determine the impact of the relative placement initiative on case practice and, more importantly, on outcomes for children. Reviewers paid particular attention to best practices and areas needing improvement in these kinship placements.

The results of the on-site review of kinship placements are as follows:

It is clear that the Department's philosophy and policy regarding placement with relatives are given a high priority in the Area Offices reviewed. There was evidence of efforts to locate kin as placement resources in all of the placement cases reviewed. In addition, documentation reflected realistic assessments of relatives - with a few cases showing relatives appropriately ruled out as placement resources. Reviewers identified a range of relative placement options for children including maternal and paternal relatives such as grandparents, aunts/uncles, and mature siblings.

The reviewers were also able to confirm that during the period under review, these placements provided more stability and maintained more connections for these children while they were separated from their birth parents. However, in a few cases, children experienced several placements in non-relative foster homes before being placed in a more stable kinship home.

When children were not able to return to their parent(s), a number of relatives provided permanent homes for them. It was encouraging to reviewers to see relatives who were able to support changing goals, when appropriate. Contrary to perceptions about these placements, the reviewers also discovered that the Department is having a degree of success in adoption by relatives. Stakeholders firmly believe that the State's commitment to equal financial support for relative foster care, kinship adoption, and kinship guardianship facilitates the achievement of permanency for these children.

Stakeholders noted, however, that there is a need for the Department to pay closer attention to visitation and training issues of relative placements. Some stakeholders expressed the opinion that relatives are not aware of the differences and difficulties involved in raising children who have been subjected to abuse and/or neglect by kin and that they are not knowledgeable about the complexities of the child welfare, legal, and social services systems. Finally, stakeholders stressed the need for the Department to perform a more diligent search for absent fathers and to do so at the time that the family initially becomes involved with DSS.

Status for Permanency Outcome 2: In Substantial Conformity.

Basis: Twenty-nine (91%) of the 32 applicable out-of-home placement cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved; therefore, the required 90% case performance level was met.

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING OUTCOMES

Well-Being Outcome 1: Families will have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.

- 76% of the cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved.

In the majority of applicable cases, case plan activities and services to children and families were in place and working well. In addition, providers and DSS workers were actively involved in ensuring that the needs of families were assessed and appropriately addressed. For the most part, workers made diligent efforts to provide services to families in a timely manner, however, the lack of certain services or extensive waiting lists for particular services were found to be barriers to families gaining timely access to needed services. Of particular note was the lack of available/accessible mental health services and alcohol/drug treatment services; a shortage of placement resources for adolescents and for children with mental health needs; and, a lack of affordable housing. A comprehensive list of needed services can be found in Item VIII, Service Array, on pages 43 - 47 of this report.

Among the applicable cases, assessments of child and family service needs were sometimes inadequate or not completed. In addition, some of the services provided were not appropriate for the assessed needs. In some cases, workers failed to follow-up on referrals to providers to ensure that parents were able to access and/or were participating in services.

The cases reviewed showed great variation in workers' practice regarding engaging families in case planning. Reviewers found that in some cases, families were not involved in the development of their case plans while in others, families were actively participating in planning for the safety and well-being of their children. Throughout the State, however, stakeholders talked about the inconsistent identification and/or involvement of fathers in the case planning process. It was clear to reviewers, however, that the Department's emphasis on worker contact with children and parents resulted in a level of visitation that met and sometimes exceeded the State's policy requirements.

Status for Well-Being Outcome 1: Not In Substantial Conformity.

Basis: Twelve (24%) of the 50 cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as either partially or not achieved; therefore, the required case performance level of 90% was not met.

Well-Being Outcome 2: Children received appropriate services to meet their educational needs.

- 86% of the applicable cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved.

Although this area was given an overall rating of needing improvement, the following strengths were identified. In 86% of the applicable cases, workers were having regular contact with schools and advocating strongly for needed educational services for children in substitute care. A number of stakeholders reported that DSS workers – with the help of educational consultants – pay close attention to the educational needs of children in care. Stakeholders expressed the opinion that there are issues in the educational system – such as resistance to admitting special needs children and an unwillingness to share the cost of services - that negatively impact the ability of DSS to ensure that the educational needs of special needs children are addressed.

In six of the applicable cases, however, workers failed to follow-up on issues such as school failures and truancy and/or the Department's efforts to meet children's educational needs were not documented in the case/service plan.

Status of Well-Being Outcome 2: Not In Substantial Conformity

Basis: While 86% of the 43 cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved, 14% were rated as partially or not achieved; therefore, the State did not meet the required case performance level of 90%.

Outcome WB3: Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

- 69% of the applicable cases reviewed under this outcome were rated as substantially achieved.

Although this area was given an overall rating of needing improvement, in the majority of cases, workers did attend to children's health and mental health needs.

However, in a number of the applicable cases in the area of physical health, there was no documentation on children's medical needs, the services provided, and the immunizations needed or received. Also, in a few cases, children's health conditions were not treated.

While improvements are also needed in the area of services to meet children's mental health, in the majority of applicable cases, reviewers found high quality evaluations of mental health needs and appropriate services that were initiated quickly after placement. In some cases, however, reviewers noted that mental health services were lacking. Many stakeholders expressed the opinion that there are significant gaps in mental health services and that there are many "turf" issues in the system that impeded the timely delivery of services.

Some stakeholders spoke highly of a collaborative and promising effort between the Department of Mental Health and DSS to better serve the mental health needs of children in care.

Status of Well-Being Outcome 3: Not In Substantial Conformity

Basis: Fifteen (31%) of the 49 applicable cases were rated as either partially or not achieved; therefore, the required case performance level of 90% was not met.

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Stakeholders reported that FamilyNet allows for more efficient recording, gathering, review and analysis of child welfare data. As such, it provides case level data on the status, demographic characteristics, location, and goals for the placement of every child who is in foster care. According to the statewide assessment, FamilyNet includes functionality for the following child welfare business practices: service, resource, staff, and financial management; legal services; quality assurance; and reporting and interagency interfaces.

Status of the State's Statewide Information System: In Substantial Conformity.

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Reviewers and stakeholders noted three areas of strength and two areas needing improvement in the case review system. Those needing improvement include the requirements for joint development of the case plan with the family and the quality of permanency hearings in the Courts.

While reviewers found that case/service plans existed in all but one of the cases, as noted earlier, families were not consistently involved in the development of these plans. In addition, parents and other stakeholders described the current plan as cumbersome for workers and confusing to families. However, stakeholders reported that the success of a pilot program on engaging families in case planning has had a ripple effect with more and more offices interested in replicating this more effective model. Stakeholders noted that the Department intends to take this initiative statewide.

The case review and stakeholder interviews confirmed the finding in the statewide assessment that in almost all cases, periodic (foster care) reviews are held in a timely fashion. It was also reported that the foster care review panels have significant input in case management decisions and that these reviews are regarded as meaningful events. Both the case review and stakeholder interviews revealed that, for the most part, foster parents and pre-adoptive parents are being invited and encouraged to attend or to submit a written report to foster care reviews and permanency hearings.

However, while reviewers found that permanency hearings were generally occurring in a timely manner, they received very mixed feedback from stakeholders on the quality and effectiveness of these hearings. A number of stakeholders reported that courts often had extremely brief and perfunctory permanency hearings that did not adequately address the ASFA requirements for these hearings.

Despite these issues, stakeholder interviews confirmed that more judges are becoming increasingly knowledgeable of and attentive to child welfare matters, including permanency hearings and TPR requirements. The State was found to have in place a TPR process in accord with ASFA requirements and compelling reason exceptions to TPR were documented in the case files. For the most part, reviewers felt that these exceptions were being appropriately applied. However, some stakeholders reported that TPR and permanency for some older youth and youth in residential treatment programs was not always vigorously pursued.

Status of the State's Case Review System: Not In Substantial Conformity.

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE (QA) SYSTEM

Stakeholders consistently mentioned the strengthened licensing standards for foster homes as the basis for ensuring the health and safety of children in-care. They also spoke about the frequency that DSS Workers visited foster homes to ensure that these standards were being met.

While a number of QA practices effective in evaluating the quality of services were noted, stakeholders clearly emphasized the need for a centralized, independent QA System/Unit to better inform the policy and practice of the Department on a regular basis. It is the opinion of many stakeholders that data need to be readily and systematically available for use in the State's ongoing efforts to improve the quality and effectiveness of services for children and their families.

Status of the State's Quality Assurance System: In Substantial Conformity.

VII. TRAINING

The Department was found to have a fairly comprehensive initial training program that supports the goals and objectives in the State's Child and Family Service Plan (CFSP.) Some stakeholders discussed the need for a Child Welfare Training Institute to be developed in partnership with the Schools of Social Work, which would allow for additional time in training and job shadowing prior to full caseload assignment. Stakeholders also felt strongly that new workers need more time to explore their own values and attitudes about working with families from diverse economic, racial and cultural backgrounds. The case review also found that additional, on-going training is needed to enhance the ability of workers and supervisors to better carry out their duties with regard to the services included in the CFSP. The following training needs were identified: making better assessments and engaging families in case planning; family-centered and culturally sensitive services to diverse families; addressing mental health and substance abuse issues; effectively providing services to and working with adolescents with behavioral issues.

The Department provides training for prospective foster and adoptive parents using a training model called, Massachusetts Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP). Stakeholders reported that MAPP is a well-tested curriculum that addresses the skills and knowledge base that prospective foster and adoptive parents need to carry out their duties. While reviewers received mixed feedback about the participation of relative foster parents in pre-service training, the need for relative providers to receive training and support on setting boundaries with birth parents and understanding the child welfare and legal processes were clearly noted.

Finally, stakeholders spoke highly of the increased level and variety of ongoing foster and adoptive parent training courses that are offered through KidsNet. However, some stakeholders reported that the State's requirement for all foster parents to engage in ten hours per year of on-going training is largely ignored.

Status of the State's Training System: In Substantial Conformity.

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

The case review and stakeholder interviews confirmed that the Department has developed a comprehensive set of services to assess and address the needs of children and their families and noted that a number of these services can be tailored to meet particular needs. Stakeholders in all three sites noted the MDAT process, the Domestic Violence Consultants, services available through the Family Based Services contracts, and the availability of flexible funding as examples of how the Department has enhanced the array of services.

However, in some cases, reviewers identified needs that were not met and noted delays in service provision due to the lack of available and/or accessible services. Both reviewers and stakeholders particularly noted the need to improve and increase mental health, special education, and alcohol/drug in-patient treatment services. In addition, stakeholders identified a shortage of out-of-home placement resources across the continuum of care. Finally, stakeholders provided a list of services that in their opinion was needed to effectively support children and to preserve and assist in the rehabilitation of families involved with the Department.

Status of the State's System of Services: In Substantial Conformity.

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Stakeholders generally viewed the Department as becoming more open and willing to engage cooperatively in working with children and families. Confirming information in the statewide assessment, stakeholders spoke of close working relationships between the Department and the courts, schools of social work, law enforcement, mandated reporters, providers, parent networks and a number of coalitions both at the State and local levels. Area Directors were said to be actively pursuing opportunities for collaboration in their respective communities. However, stakeholders both from within and outside of the Department spoke about “turf” and confidentiality issues continuing to hinder coordination between some programs. Stakeholders particularly noted ongoing issues between DSS and the Departments of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Education. Despite some promising initiatives between DSS and these other agencies, it was said that these issues continue to be a barrier to more effectively serving the needs of children and their families.

Status of the Agency's Responsiveness to the Community: In Substantial Conformity.

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT, AND RETENTION

Stakeholders confirmed that the standards for foster family homes and child care institutions are comprehensive and in accord with recommended national standards. Also, in compliance with Federal requirements, stakeholders reported that the Department holds all homes to the same standards and that it completes criminal records checks on all potential foster and adoptive homes. In addition, stakeholders expressed the opinion that the Department's high level of scrutiny of these homes is contributing to the safety of children in placement.

The State was found to have a process for ensuring the diligent recruitment of potential families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed. Stakeholders confirmed that overall recruitment efforts for both foster and adoptive parents are creative and extensive.

According to the statewide assessment, the Department employs a variety of techniques as part of its recruitment strategy. Also, monthly regional meetings are conducted to review all children not in pre-adoptive homes and all families awaiting children. In addition, quarterly matching meetings are held around the State so that prospective adoptive families can meet the children who are waiting for an adoptive home.

While acknowledging the successes of the Department in this area, stakeholders spoke about barriers to recruiting potential foster and adoptive parents that included the need for increased day care availability for two parent working foster families and income requirements for foster parents. In addition, some stakeholders made particular note of the need for the Department to increase its efforts in locating foster and adoptive homes for Native American children.

The State also has a process for the effective use of cross-jurisdictional resources. In the cases reviewed, children were placed in adoptive and pre-adoptive homes in a number of other states. In addition, as reported in the statewide assessment, the Department has revised its matching protocols. According to stakeholders, these revised protocols have improved collaboration among private agencies and have facilitated the sharing of information on waiting children and prospective adoptive families. Finally, most stakeholders gave very positive feedback on "matching" events and especially noted those sponsored by a private business (Jordan's Furniture). The consensus was that these events have greatly enhanced the Department's capacity to connect waiting children with prospective parents in other jurisdictions. However, because of issues with visitation, negative experiences in getting home studies completed, and difficulty negotiating subsidies and finalizing adoptions through the ICPC, stakeholders still expressed concerns about these placements.

Finally, several programs were cited for their efforts at retaining foster and adoptive resources. These include programs such as KidsNet and Adoption Crossroads that provide training, support groups, information, referral and some respite services to foster and adoptive parents.

Status of the State's Foster and Adoptive Parenting Licensing, Recruitment and Retention System: In Substantial Conformity.